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## ABSTRACT

This report presents findings of a study that explored issues related to juvenile delinquency by examined the most recent data on juvenile arrests and the delinquency cases processed by U.S. juvenile courts. The study compared the characteristics of young offenders arrested in recent years with those arrested in 1980 and analyzed the responses of juvenile courts to those offenders once they had been charged. Findings show that offenders aged 12 or younger were involved in 9% of all juvenile arrests, and that arrests of juveniles aged 13 and 14 grew disproportionately. Arrest rates for juveniles aged 12 or younger were far lower than for older juveniles. However, Violent Crime Index arrests declined 3% for all juveniles between 1994 and 1995. Similar decreases were seen for those aged 12 and younger and aged 15 and older, with a 5% drop in violent crime arrests for those aged 13 and 14. Between 1985 and 1994, the number of delinquency cases involving 13-year-olds increased more than cases involving juveniles of any other age. In spite of these increases, the actual number of young juveniles remained relatively small when compared with the caseload of older juvenile offenders seen by law enforcement agencies and the courts. Recent trends are particularly encouraging as they relate to the delinquent behavior of offenders aged 13 and 14. Findings suggest that juvenile courts and juvenile justice agencies should continue preventive services and early intervention for offenders aged 14 and younger. They also suggest, however, that it is inaccurate to depict the typical juvenile offender as significantly younger than the offenders of 10 or 15 years ago. (SLD)

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# The Youngest Delinquents: Offenders Under Age 15\*

by Jeffrey A. Butts, Ph.D., and Howard N. Snyder, Ph.D.

## Foreword

In recent years, Americans have been alarmed by increases in juvenile crime and by new reports of heinous acts by younger juveniles. Against a decade-long background of disturbing statistics, anecdotal evidence of violent children affects the public discourse on juvenile justice. But sound decision-making rests on more than shocking news stories.

*The Youngest Delinquents: Offenders Under Age 15* draws on data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Juvenile Court Data Archive to track trends in youth crime. While confirming the recent disproportionate increase in the number of young offenders, the Bulletin reports that juvenile offenders as a group have not become markedly younger in the past decade. An additional encouraging finding is that the number of violent crime index arrests, which declined 3 percent between 1994 and 1995 for all juveniles dropped 6 percent among youth ages 13 and 14.

The data presented in this Bulletin will enable policymakers and the public to better understand the role that younger delinquents play in the overall problem of juvenile crime and violence as the debate continues over the best way to intervene with these young offenders.

**Shay Bilchik**, Administrator  
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Many people believe that juvenile delinquents are becoming younger and committing more serious crimes at earlier ages than the young offenders of 10 or 15 years ago. This belief in an increasingly younger and more serious juvenile offender population influences juvenile justice policy and shapes public attitudes about the Nation's juvenile justice system.

Has there actually been a change in the age profile of juvenile offenders encoun-

tered by law enforcement authorities and juvenile courts across the United States? Is the juvenile justice system seeing ever younger, increasingly serious offenders?

This Bulletin presents the findings of a study that explored these issues by examining the most recent data on juvenile arrests and the delinquency cases processed by U.S. juvenile courts. The study compared the characteristics of young offenders arrested in recent years with those arrested in 1980 and analyzed the juvenile courts response to those offenders once they had been charged.

The data used here are from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Uniform Crime Reporting Program and the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, which is maintained for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by the National Center for Juvenile Justice.

Findings from the study indicate:

- Offenders under age 15 represent the leading edge of the juvenile crime problem, and their numbers have been growing.
- Violent crime arrests, for example, grew 94 percent between 1980 and 1995 for youth under age 15, compared with 47 percent for older youth.
- Consequently, the age profile of juvenile offenders has changed some-

\*Adapted and reprinted from *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, September 1997 with permission from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, September 1997.

what since 1980. Offenders under age 15 accounted for an increased proportion of all juvenile arrests for violent crime in 1995 (30 percent), compared with 1990 (28 percent), 1985 (29 percent), and 1980 (25 percent), the most significant increases occurring between 1980 and 1985.

- However, recent trends are encouraging. Between 1994 and 1995, decreases in the number of juvenile arrests for violence crime were greater for offenders ages 13 and 14 (down 6 percent) than for those age 15 or older (down 2 percent).

Because offenders under age 15 have a high risk of continued criminal involvement, yet are often more amenable to services and sanctions, juvenile crime policy should continue to focus on early and effective interventions with these youngest delinquents.

#### **Offenders age 12 or younger were involved in 9 percent of all juvenile arrests**

Fewer than one in 10 juvenile arrests in 1995 involved youth age 12 or younger. Arrests of 13- and 14-year-old juveniles accounted for another 25 percent of juvenile arrests in 1995.

The proportion of juvenile arrests that involved offenders age 12 or younger varied by offense. In 1995, youth in this age group were responsible for 8 percent of arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses and 13 percent of arrests for Property Crime Index offenses. They accounted for 2 percent of juvenile arrests for drug abuse violations, but were responsible for 35 percent of arrests for arson. Other offenses in which a relatively high proportion of arrests involved ju-

veniles age 12 or younger included vandalism and sex offenses.

Offenders ages 13 and 14 accounted for 23 percent of juvenile arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses and 28 percent of arrests for Property Crime Index offenses in 1995. Juveniles in this age group were involved in 10 percent of arrests for murder and 23 percent of arrests for aggravated assault. They accounted for fewer than 10 percent of arrests for offenses such as liquor law violations, but were involved in more than 25 percent of juvenile arrests for simple assault, vandalism, sex offenses, disorderly conduct, and running away.

The majority of juvenile arrests in 1995 involved youth age 15 or older. These older youth were involved in 70 percent of juvenile arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses and 58 percent of juvenile arrests for Property Crime Index offenses. They accounted for 86 percent of juvenile arrests for murder and more than 80 percent of the arrests for forgery, embezzlement, driving under the influence, and liquor law violations.

#### **Arrests of juveniles ages 13 and 14 grew disproportionately**

The total number of juvenile arrests increased 26 percent between 1980 and 1995. Arrests involving juveniles age 12 or younger grew 24 percent, while those involving juveniles ages 13 and 14 increased 54 percent.

In 1995 there were nearly 148,000 arrests of juveniles for Violent Crime Index offenses. The number of these arrests involving juveniles age 15 or older (103,000) far exceeded the number of arrests involving younger offenders. However, while Violent Crime Index arrests involving older juveniles increased 47 percent between 1980 and

*Continued on next page*

1995, arrests of juveniles ages 13 and 14 grew 92 percent, and arrests of juveniles age 12 or younger grew 102 percent. Arrests of juveniles ages 13 and 14 for Property Crime Index offenses increased 16 percent between 1980 and 1995, compared with a decline of 1 percent for juveniles age 12 or younger and a decrease of 9 percent for older juveniles. Most of the growth in Property Crime Index arrests involving juveniles ages 13 and 14 resulted from an increase of 35 percent in arrests for larceny-theft.

In many other offense categories, arrests of juveniles ages 13 and 14 increased more than arrests involving older youth between 1980 and 1995. Weapons arrests for instance, increased more for juveniles age 12 or younger (206 percent) than for juveniles ages 13 and 14 (167 percent) or older juveniles (93 percent). However, 70 percent of all juvenile arrests for weapons violations in 1995 involved youth age 15 or older, and the number of offenders age 12 or younger remained relatively small.

#### **Arrest rates for juveniles age 12 or younger were far lower than for older juveniles**

The juvenile population of the United States has fluctuated in recent decades. Analyzing per capita arrest rates removes the effect of this changing population and clarifies the comparison of arrest trends over time.

Calculations of age-specific arrest rates using unpublished FBI data show that the 1995 arrest rate for Violent Crime Index offenses was much lower for juveniles age 12 or younger (89 per 100,000) than for those ages 13 and 14 (460 per 100,000) or older youth (979 per 100,000). However, arrest rates for juveniles offenders have increased disproportionately in recent years. Between

1980 and 1995, for example, the Violent Crime Index arrest rate increased 91 percent for juveniles age 12 or younger, 76 percent for youth ages 13 and 14, and 56 percent for youth age 15 or older.

#### **In recent years, arrests for index offenses decline more for offenders age 14 or younger than for youth 15 or older**

The most recent juvenile arrest trends suggest that the juvenile justice system may have turned a corner since 1994. Violent Crime Index arrests declined 3 percent for all juveniles between 1994 and 1995 for youth age 15 or older, but decreased 3 percent for youth age 12 or younger and dropped 5 percent for youth ages 13 and 14. While the significance of any single-year change should not be exaggerated, these recent patterns are an encouraging turnaround from earlier arrest trends and run counter to predictions of increased delinquency based on the demographic trend of rising numbers of young people.

#### **Between 1985 and 1994, juvenile court cases involving offenders age 12 or younger increased 32 percent**

Juvenile courts in the United States handled an estimated 1,555,200 delinquency cases in 1994. This number represented a 20 percent increase over the 1990 caseload and a 41 percent increase over the number of cases handled in 1985.

Between 1985 and 1994, the number of delinquency cases involving juveniles age 12 or younger grew 32 percent, those involving juveniles ages 13 and 14 increased 49 percent, and cases involving older juveniles grew 30 percent. In all three age groups, the largest relative increases be-

\*Person offenses are homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, simple assault, and other violent sex offenses.

tween 1985 and 1994 were in cases in which a person offense was the most serious charge. Since 1990, however, drug offenses have increased the most for juveniles of all ages.

**Juveniles age 12 or younger were involved in 11% of juvenile court delinquency cases in 1994**

In 1994 juveniles age 12 or younger accounted for 12 percent of all person offense cases, 13 percent of property offense cases, 2 percent of drug law violation cases, and 6 percent of public order offense cases (i.e., disorderly conduct, weapons offenses, liquor law violations, etc.).

Between 1985 and 1994, the proportion of juveniles ages 14 or younger among the total delinquency caseload did not change substantially. The percentage of juveniles age 12 or younger decreased from 12 percent to 11 percent and the percentage of juveniles age 13 and 14 grew from 27 percent to 28 percent.

Even when each type of offense is considered separately, the age profile of delinquency cases did not change significantly between 1985 and 1994. Juveniles ages 13 and 14 were involved in a slightly larger proportion of person, property, and public order offense cases in 1994, but the largest change was just 3 percent. This group accounted for 26 percent of public order offense cases in 1994, as compared with 23 percent in 1985.

**Changes in juvenile court case rates varied among different age groups**

Between 1985 and 1994, the number of delinquency cases involving 13-year-old juveniles increased more (55 percent) than cases involving juveniles of any other age. The number of cases involving 16-year-olds

grew 42 percent, and those involving 17-year-olds increased 33 percent.

Much of the disproportionate increase in delinquency cases involving young juveniles may have been due to the changing nature of the youth population itself. To control for fluctuations in the size of the juvenile population, the number of delinquency cases involving youth of each age group was converted into a rate that represented the number of cases processed by juvenile courts for every 1,000 youth in the age group at risk of referral to a juvenile court.\*

Analyzing per capita case rates reveals that age-related changes in the cases referred to the juvenile justice system are partly related to the relative size of youth population cohorts as they move through the ages of juvenile court jurisdiction.

Between 1985 and 1994, the total delinquency case rate for juveniles increased 33 percent, from 42.0 to 56.1 cases disposed for every 1,000 youth at risk. The smallest relative increases were for juveniles age 12 or younger. Between 1985 and 1994, the case rate for 11- and 12-year-olds increased 13 percent and 29 percent, respectively. The growth in delinquency case rates was higher for juveniles between the ages of 13 and 16 (up about 45 percent).

While it is useful to examine variations in the age profile of delinquency caseloads in order to appreciate the changing workload of the juvenile justice system, it is not appropriate to view any change in juvenile court caseloads as proof that youth of a certain age have become more delinquent. Before inferences about delinquency trends are made, juvenile population changes should be analyzed as well.

\*Population at risk of referral is adjusted for state variations in the ages covered by juvenile court jurisdiction. Juveniles at risk are defined as youth age 10 or older who were at or under the upper age of original jurisdiction of the juvenile courts in their state.



### **Juvenile court outcomes for offenders age 12 or younger were often less severe**

In both 1994 and 1985, cases involving juveniles age 12 or younger were less likely than those involving older juveniles to be processed formally, more likely to receive probation as the most restrictive disposition, and less likely to result in detention or out-of-home placement. For example, in 1994, juveniles age 12 or younger were less likely to be processed formally with the filing of a delinquency petition (38 percent) than were either juveniles ages 13 and 14 (52 percent) or older juveniles (59 percent). The use of formal handling increased between 1985 and 1994 for all age groups.

If handled formally, delinquency cases involving juveniles age 12 or younger were less likely to result in adjudication. In 1994, 50 percent of petitioned cases involving youth in this age group were adjudicated, as compared with 59 percent of cases involving juveniles age 15 or older and 60 percent of those involving juveniles ages 13 and 14. The use of adjudication decreased between 1985 and 1994 for juveniles of all ages.

In 1994, delinquency cases involving juveniles age 12 or younger were far less likely than cases involving older juveniles to be judicially waived to criminal (adult) court. Fewer than 1 percent of formally processed cases involving juveniles age 14 or younger were judicially waived to criminal court. Of 12,000 cases judicially waived to criminal courts nationwide in 1994, fewer than 500 involved juveniles under age 15.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study confirm that the number of offenders age 14 or younger in the Nation's juvenile justice system has increased disproportionately in recent years. Relative to the 1980s, arrests and juvenile

court cases involving youth under the age of 15 increased more than those involving juveniles age 15 or older.

However, the actual number of offenders age 14 or younger remained relatively small as compared with the caseload of older juvenile offenders seen by law enforcement agencies and the courts. Thus, juvenile offenders as a group have not become markedly younger in the past decade. Offenders age 12 or younger represent the same proportion of juvenile arrests (9 percent) and juvenile court cases (11 percent) as they did more than a decade ago, and the percentage of offenders ages 13 and 14 increased only slightly.

Recent trends are particularly encouraging as they relate to the delinquent behavior of offenders ages 13 and 14. Between 1994 and 1995, arrests for Property Crime Index offenses declined for offenders in this age group while remaining unchanged for older youth. Violent crime arrests, which decreased for all juveniles between 1994 and 1995, decreased the most among offenders ages 13 and 14.

Of course, youth under the age of 15 still account for 3 of every 10 juvenile arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses and 4 of every 10 juvenile arrests for Property Crime Index offenses. The findings of this study suggest, therefore, that the Nation's juvenile courts and juvenile justice agencies should continue preventive services and early intervention for offenders age 14 or younger. The findings also suggest, however, that is inaccurate to depict the typical juvenile offender of today as significantly younger than the offenders of 10 or 15 years ago.

Finally, it is also important to remember that this study relies entirely upon official data reported by law enforcement agencies and juvenile courts. Thus, the findings of

Between 1985 and 1994, person offense cases involving youth ages 13 and 14 increased more than any other type of delinquency case

Offense	1985	1990	1994	Percent Change	
				1985-1994	1990-1994
<b>Juveniles age 12 or younger</b>	<b>128,000</b>	<b>157,500</b>	<b>168,700</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>7%</b>
Person	20,700	31,700	41,800	101	32
Property	93,100	109,900	105,200	13	-4
Drugs	1,500	1,500	2,700	75	78
Public order	12,600	14,400	19,100	52	33
<b>Juveniles age 13 and 14</b>	<b>294,400</b>	<b>349,600</b>	<b>438,300</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>25%</b>
Person	48,400	69,200	100,200	107	45
Property	186,900	213,600	241,800	29	13
Drugs	13,300	11,400	20,700	56	82
Public order	45,900	55,500	75,500	65	36
<b>Juveniles age 15 or older</b>	<b>681,500</b>	<b>792,100</b>	<b>948,200</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>20%</b>
Person	105,200	142,600	194,000	84	36
Property	378,600	428,000	456,300	21	7
Drugs	59,300	58,200	96,800	63	66
Public order	138,400	163,400	201,000	45	23

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. Percent change calculations are based on unrounded numbers.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the National Center for Juvenile Justice, National Juvenile Court Data Archive: Juvenile Court Case Records 1985-1

the study inform the reader only about young offenders who come into contact with the justice system. Since not all of the juveniles who violate the law are arrested, and not all of those who are arrested are referred to court, changes in the characteristics of juvenile arrests and juvenile court cases may reflect the evolving practices of law enforcement and the courts as much as they reflect the changing behavior of young offenders.



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